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### Byron and John Murray: A Poet and His Publisher

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*Byron and John Murray: A Poet and His Publisher*, by Mary O'Connell, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2014, xi + 220pp. 8 illustrations.

The names of Lord Byron and John Murray II will always be closely associated. Although Byron published work with other publishers, no other poet of the Romantic period – and few in any period – had such a close, sustained and lucrative relationship with a publisher. Murray's canny marketing strategies were integral to the construction of Byron's celebrity, and Byron's unprecedented sales were essential to Murray's rise to pre-eminence in the world of London publishing. Almost a quarter of Byron's surviving letters were written to Murray, more than to any other correspondent (although this reflects the assiduity with which Murray preserved Byron's letters as well as the frequency with which Byron wrote them). Neither man would have been the same without the other, and both of them knew it. 'My name is connected to your fame', Murray wrote to Byron. '[W]hat is not published by you is not written by me', Byron wrote to Murray.

While contemporary reviewers often drew attention to the formats in which Murray published Byron's poems, recent critics such as Jerome Christensen and Caroline Franklin have also paid attention to the relationship between the two men. But only in the last few years have the resources become available to explore their relationship in real detail. This is largely thanks to the efforts of two recently deceased and much-missed scholars, Peter Cochran and Andrew Nicholson, who are in a sense the presiding spirits of this book. With the arrival

of the Murray Archive at the National Library of Scotland, the publication of transcripts of Douglas Kinnaird's correspondent with Murray on Cochran's website, and, above all, the appearance of Nicholson's monumental edition of Murray's letters to Byron, the conditions are right for an in-depth study of Murray's role in Byron's writing life.

This book takes a while to get started. Two chapters are devoted to John Murray's career (and his father's) before he met Byron, and to Byron's dealings with publishers before he met John Murray. There are some interesting insights in these chapters. Murray inherited from his father some of his business caution and his faith in advertising. He was not at first a publisher of literature, and the *Quarterly Review* took up much of his time. Byron paid close attention to the physical production of his books and their marketing well before he met Murray, and was continuing to negotiate with Cawthorn about publishing *Hints from Horace* even while Murray was preparing the first edition of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. But this material could have been covered much more efficiently. As it stands, around twenty percent of the book is devoted to the period before Byron and Murray met one another. O'Connell could have moved through this period much faster in order to get to the relationship that lies at the heart of the book.

Once the book gets to the relationship between its central characters, its approach is primarily descriptive rather than argumentative. It reconstructs the story of Byron's relationship with Murray, proceeding chronologically through chapters on *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the years of fame, the separation, and

*Don Juan*. O'Connell relies throughout on the correspondence among Byron, Murray, John Cam Hobhouse, Douglas Kinnaird, Caroline Lamb and others, drawing on both published sources and diligent research among unpublished documents in the Murray archive. Some of Murray's letters to Byron are reproduced in facsimile. The basic outlines of the story will be familiar to readers of Byron's biographies and Nicholson's edition of Murray's letters to his star poet. At times, familiar material is rehearsed unnecessarily, but the story is clearly told.

One of the most interesting aspects of Byron's relationship with Murray is the way in which both men managed not to let their opposing political views impinge too much on their business dealings. O'Connell's approach to this facet of their relationship is to play down the importance of politics in Murray's make-up. He was certainly conservative by temperament, she suggests, but he was not a man of strong political convictions. He was motivated primarily by business concerns and knew how to set aside his politics when they got in the way of his profits. He founded the arch-Tory *Quarterly Review* because he saw a gap in the market, rather than because he endorsed its politics (which, in fact, he sometimes tried to moderate). He urged Byron to tone down dissenting or heretical aspects of his poems not because he objected to them on political or religious grounds, but because he knew they would hurt the sale of Byron's works. Murray claimed that he was not 'squeamish' about *Don Juan's* improprieties, but 'the character of the Middling Classes in the country – is certainly highly moral – and we should not offend them' (p. 182). Whether or not Murray was motivated by Conservative political convictions, however, it's clear

that Byron thought he was. He repeatedly refers in letters to Murray as 'a Tory' (p. 157) and 'a damned Tory' (p. 126) and blames what he sees as his timidity in publishing on his political views and his desire to cultivate the acquaintance those who shared them.

Murray wasn't just a hard-headed businessman, however; O'Connell argues that he felt a proprietary interest in Byron's works that went beyond his business investment in them. This made him feel entitled to intervene in the texts to make sure they were well received. Most notoriously, he omitted Manfred's dying words in the first edition, much to Byron's annoyance. Murray claimed that he thought such a 'trivial' change was scarcely worth mentioning to Byron (p. 162). O'Connell mostly takes Murray's letters at face value on these points, but at times this seems naïve. The dying words of an eponymous character can't be called 'trivial' in any case, and in this case Manfred's dying words were likely to be controversially irreligious. Here, as elsewhere, O'Connell's desire to defend Murray against what she perceives as unjust aspersions leads her to read his letters and his actions uncritically.

I also wished that the book had drawn on Murray's ledgers as extensively as it drew on his letters. There is some useful information here on Murray's strategies for marketing his books. He relied on advertising to an unusual extent, spending large sums on it, and sent out multiple review copies of some publications. The ledgers in the Murray archive might have supplied more information on Murray's business practices that would have enriched this study

by giving more information about how Murray's business practices took on significance within the history of the book trade.

The relationship between Murray and Byron went well beyond business on both sides. O'Connell claims that they had 'fundamentally compatible personalities' (p. 201). Divided by class, they nonetheless had some things in common. Both were born into uncertain prospects, but rose to prominence in London (albeit in different social spheres). Both lost parents at a young age (Byron never knew his father, who died when he was three; his mother died when he was 23; Murray's father died when he was 15). While Murray's letters to Byron are often deferential, they are also gossipy, and Byron came to rely on Murray for news from England once he had settled in Italy. Byron's letters, in turn, were relaxed and intimate, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that he knew Murray read them out to visitors to his Albemarle Street premises. While Byron's friends and agents Hobhouse and Kinnaird always treated Murray as a tradesman, Byron often wrote to him as a friend.

The breakdown of their relationship was therefore all the more painful on both sides. Both men showed great forbearance in dealing with the other, and despite obvious annoyance on both sides, they each hoped to sustain their relationship. O'Connell points out that Murray was an infrequent correspondent, harried with other business, as well as reluctant to strain his personal relationship with Byron by writing frankly when he thought the poet's works wouldn't be popular. Byron felt neglected, and complained about Murray's 'shuffling' and delays. O'Connell makes clear that the underlying problem, however, lay in

Byron's shifting understanding of his poetic ambitions, as he rejected his earlier celebrity and sought to pursue his own creative path. Murray's characteristic approach to asking for changes in Byron's poems was to claim that alterations were required in order to conciliate the public taste. The less Byron concerned himself with his immediate reception by the reading public, and the more hostile he felt towards that public, the less weight this argument carried with him.

Overall, then, this is a competent and thoroughly researched study that reconstructs the relationship between Byron and Murray from both published and archival sources. There are a few minor errors, such as the mistranslation of *Cui Bono* as 'what's the point?' (p. 95). A full subject index would be more helpful than the index of names provided. For readers who know little about these figures, the book will offer a useful introduction. For scholars who are already familiar with Byron's and Murray's letters, this book fills in some useful details without changing the shape of the overall picture very significantly.

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